

## There Is Nothing To Hold On To

As you are gathering for this time, there is a slide show that runs on the screen. I call it “the announcement slides.” Actually, over the years it has morphed to the point where it contains not so many announcements and more and more cartoons.

Though these slides play on a continuous loop the program begins with a “welcome to Ordinary Life” which announces that Ordinary Life is an educational offering of St. Paul’s. After that a slide says: “Ordinary Life seeks to create a crucible in which people can deepen awareness of who they are, develop relationship with others, grow in spiritual intelligence, make a difference in the world.”

Then, because more often than not images can convert so much more and better than words, there is a cartoon I currently show. I change the content of this almost every week but right now it shows Wile E. Coyote chasing Road Runner. Road Runner has clearly made a turn Wile E. wasn’t anticipating. So, way too late in the action, Wile E. has run off the road into sheer space. The caption says, “This is what authentic spiritual awakening really looks like . . .”

How true.

The title I’ve given this talk today is “There Is Nothing To Hold On To.” I’m basing the talk on a question Jesus asks Mary, his

mother, in a parable about Jesus that is told in the Gospel of John, the most metaphorical of all the Jesus narratives that we have.

By the time we are done here today I hope the title makes sense, that its claim is not frightening and that you find the truth of it useful in your deepening your awareness of who you are, how you can develop respectful relationships with others, grow in religious and spiritual intelligence and make a difference in this world.

You are going to be hearing some things, especially about the Jesus narrative, that you have likely not heard before. Think of me as your personal religious and spiritual interior decorator. I'm going to move some furniture around. If you don't like it, you can always move it back.

Let's start with the parable itself. The parable is most likely based on a historical event but the story is a parable and not a historical event. There is important factuality behind the story but the story didn't factually happen like we think of factuality. That make sense?

Here is the parable

There was a wedding in the village of Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there. Jesus and his disciples were guests also.

When they started running low on wine at the wedding banquet, Jesus' mother told him, "They're just about out of wine."

Jesus said, "Is that any of our business, Mother - yours or mine? This isn't my time. Don't push me."

She went ahead anyway, telling the servants, "Whatever he tells you, do it."

Six stoneware water pots were there, used by the Jews for ritual washings. Each held twenty to thirty gallons. Jesus ordered the servants, "Fill the pots with water." And they filled them to the brim.

"Now fill your pitchers and take them to the host," Jesus said, and they did.

When the host tasted the water that had become wine (he didn't know what had just happened but the servants, of course, knew) he called out to the bridegroom, "Everybody I know begins with their finest wines and after the guests have had their fill brings in the cheap stuff. But you've saved the best till now!"

This act in Cana of Galilee was the first sign Jesus gave, the first glimpse of his glory. And his disciples believed in him

Here is the question of Jesus I am wanted us to look at, try to understand and let it reposition us: “Is that any of our business, Mother - yours or mine? Don’t push me.”

Is that any way, even if you are the son of God, to talk to your mother? Who just happens to be the “blessed virgin”? But what teenager hasn’t wanted to say to her or his mother, “Mind your own business. Don’t push me.”

Those of you who have some familiarity with the Jesus narrative may remember that there was a time when Jesus was around twelve that he went with his family to Jerusalem. This was during a fall harvest festival called the Feast of Tabernacles, or Sukkoth, which celebrated family solidarity in Israel. Not all families could make the pilgrimage because enough people had to stay behind to sustain the community. Synagogues made the decisions about who would go and who would stay. At this time Jesus had two older half brothers, James and Joses, two younger full brothers, Judas and Simon, and several sisters whose names we don’t have.

To make a sacrifice in the Temple was difficult for people from Nazareth. Not because the journey was so difficult, though it was. But, because the Nazarenes didn’t have a currency-based economy and that made such a journey difficult. Within their small settlements, Galileans had no regular use for money. By the way, this is the kind of information that more recent archeology and other kinds of historical research is showing us.

The system in which Jesus' family lived was one of exchange: my wheat for your wine, my carpentry work for your weaving, etc.

The Temple toward which Mary and her family was headed was by far the biggest religious structure in that part of the world, a magnificent physical manifestation built by the Jews to show their understanding of God. The journey from where Jesus lived to Jerusalem would take about five days. It was not an easy trip for a variety of reasons. Some towns took advantage of pilgrims. Sometimes thugs and thieves preyed on pilgrims.

There was a town about a mile and a half outside of Jerusalem called Bethany. There lived there two sisters, widowed and middle-aged, Martha and Miriam, who were related to Mary by Galilean descent. Jesus' family likely stayed there before going on into Jerusalem itself.

There was a dramatic shift in differences between Nazareth and Bethany. Nazareth was poor and people lived close to the earth and on the edge. In Bethany things were much better in every way. If you ever wondered where Jesus' extreme negative views of money and the wealthy came from, you can see the roots of it here. The injustice of the domination system was clear.

To sacrifice a goat in the temple the goat had to be without blemish. They couldn't bring one on the five day journey. It might be injured along the way. Then the priests, who made

money by pronouncing the sacrifices acceptable, might decline the goat. So one had to be bought at inflated prices. Jesus' brother, James, more than likely made this transaction as Jesus was not considered old enough.

The Temple in Jerusalem was bigger than we can imagine. Huge. Beautiful. Awesome is a better word. The crowds were enormous. The atmosphere was almost carnival-like. Vendors selling all sorts of things - fruit, grain, wines, oils, flowers. Only Jews could enter the Temple's inner courtyards. Male Jews vouched for females.

Before you could enter the courtyard of the Temple, what had to happen? You had to be ritually washed. Fast forward: what were the jars in the parable about water into wine for? Ritual purification.

Everyone entering the temple had to bathe by immersion. In one of the books I have there is this description: "The entire southern slope up to the Temple entrance was developed with a system of canals, channels, and cisterns (visible today as a result of excavation), so that all Temple-goers might make themselves clean during this final ascent into the presence of the Holy One of Israel." This was a sacred obligation for a devout Jew.

On the trip to and into the Temple Jesus got a glimpse of something his heart had ached for for years. He would come to refer to it later as "the Kingdom of God."

In a really, to me, well-reasoned argument Bruce Chilton in “Rabbi Jesus” says that the one line from that story of Jesus being found in the Temple that is plausible is Jesus’ conviction that, as Chilton translates it, “it is necessary for me to be among those of my Abba.” “Abba” is the intimate term for “daddy.” This understanding of Divine Presence would be one of the things that would guide Jesus from then all the way to his execution.

Chilton argues that Jesus never returned to Nazareth, not for years. The next place we see him is being baptized by John the Immerser.

The period of time between Jesus being twelve and this Temple incident and being baptized by John is what biblical and Jesus scholars have referred to as “the hidden years.” Where was Jesus during this time? Stories, just like nature, abhor a vacuum. So, piety rushed in to fill that gap to say that Jesus went back home and did carpentry work with Joseph. There was such an insistence on the part of some in the early church that Jesus be this absolutely unique character that his formative years have been pushed to the background.

I have become convinced that Jesus, who clearly had a rebellious and adventurous spirit, did not become the passionate religious genius he was by whiling away his time in a carpentry shop. He broke out. He broke away. He left home. He let go. He

experienced having nothing to hang on to. I'll read you a passage from Chilton's book:

“John is the key to Jesus' crucial teenage years. Jesus learned from John, disputed with him, and developed the ideas that would change his own life and the course of religious history. John led Jesus on the path that made an alienated and starving, wayward pilgrim into an apprentice in the subtleties of Judaic practice, and later into an acknowledged rabbi with a charismatic personality and a distinctive path to God that was all his own.”

One more thing and this I'll put this religious/biblical literacy stuff aside for a while: these ritual bathings were not a once-in-a-lifetime matter. They happened frequently, sometimes several times a day. If you know anything about the purity code in ancient Judaism, there were hundreds of ways to become or to be declared unclean. After each incident a person had to be ritually cleansed and pronounced clean by the priests. This became part of the domination system.

The character we know as “John the Baptist” decided to take a prophetic stance against this system. If we had met John the Immerser at that time - or especially now! - we would say he was crazy. He is clearly described in the Jesus narratives as a most unusual character in every way. But Jesus was attracted to him. Imagine, if you will, John, and those who were attracted to his teachings, practiced these ritual immersions time after time.



And, over a period of time, Jesus, when he started on his own, began practices that declared people clean, or forgiven, without the benefit of these ritual immersions. He had let the rules and regulations of the religion of his youth go. It cost him his life. He knew it would.

I hope you are staying with me here because this is important for our own spiritual growth and development; which is something we get to begin again every day.

Though in the Gospel of John the “water into wine” story happens at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, most biblical scholars are now convinced that it happened near the end of his life. Cana is a small village near where Jesus was born. He has, now as an adult, returned home. But he is not the same person.

He and his disciples go to this wedding. Weddings are a frequent metaphor that Jesus uses. In actuality weddings then began in the morning and might actually go for several days. But, by the afternoon of the first day most guests were affected by the wine served. The wine ran out and what Jesus did, I promise you, is more radical and amazing than if he had actually turned water into wine.

What he did was drink the waters of purification and have others join him thereby insisting that purity began from the inside - and from Galilee - not in Jerusalem. This was a new concept of a new purity, enacted in Galilee out of reach of Herod who had, by

this time, beheaded John. This was a victory of the kind of purity Jesus had in mind over the uncleanness that the religious order of his time prescribed.

It may seem rude and offensive to us, given our Western notion of “family values,” that Jesus spoke to Mary the way he did. But, it is symbolic of Jesus’ willingness to let go of everything that his culture and religion thought was sacred in order to make his message clear that the God he called “Father” or “Abba” was not bound by humanly constructed rules and rituals.

So, just to summarize: Jesus probably left home when it was around 13. He returned once before the end of his life, didn’t get a good reception at that time from his own home folks. He was too critical of them for being a “not-welcoming people.” The average life-span at this time was somewhere in the mid to late forties. Mary was more than likely around 13 when she gave birth to Jesus. Young men were considered able to marry at around 16.

How is this relevant for us?

Where did we start today? I know I’m asking you to keep a lot in mind but this is important. And, remember, this is a parable. This is a metaphor. It was composed by people who were so spiritually brilliant. They had caught the spirit of Jesus. And, they told such wonderful stories about him.

They created this parable, based on their experience, at the beginning of the story that says, “If you are going to understand what is to come, what we are about to tell you, you will have to stand up to your tribe’s expectations of you and say, ‘No!’ ‘Mother, what concern of that is yours or mine?’”

Then, as a kicker, the message is, “You better be willing to imbibe some stuff that will change the way you think.” Because that is what wine does to you.

If there is one single thing that my training and experience in the arena of psychology has convinced me of, it is of the reality and the power of the unconscious.

My definition of the unconscious is simple and profound, profound and simple: We don’t know what we don’t know and what we don’t know owns us.

I have been so fortunate that my training took place during an era when psychological teachings were breaking out of the mold of individual and patriarchal understandings. Human beings are born into systems. If we are lucky, the system is more or less intact. If not, we suffer from that.

At an all male conference a few years ago, I heard a man tell how his life had been shaped by watching, from a crack in his bedroom door when he was seven, his mother and father in a fight with each other down the hall in the living room. The fight

escalated to the point where the husband got a revolver and shot and killed this young boy's mother and, then, shot and killed himself. You may gasp at that but I have spent much of my counseling life working with men and I can tell you that it is amazing we don't have more men living under freeways.

Most of us are luckier than that. But, all of us are affected in our young developing lives by three major things.

I call these things "The Three B's"

The first "b" stands for bonding. What kind of bonding time and experience does the newborn experience with the mother? The infant interprets, without the conscious processing of doing so but processes nonetheless, the bonding he or she experiences as a statement about life in general. Is it predictable and nurturing? Is it safe? Am I safe? Or, is it uncertain, painful and precarious?

This primal experience shapes the child's ability to trust. All sorts of factors can influence this. A death in the family. A major illness. The experience of abandonment.

Decades ago I had a man come to see me. He led a very lonely and isolated life - at least, in my opinion. He had difficulty forming and keeping relationships.

I found out that when he was an infant living in the northeast part of the United States, he contracted polio. It didn't turn out

to be a major crippling effect for him, physically. But, during that era it was believed that the best treatment for a person so diagnosed was isolation. So, he was sent to a polio hospital several states away from his parents. They did not have the resources to visit him. So, for two years - ages two and three - he lived away from mother.

About the time I was beginning my training we were told about an experiment that was done at a pediatric hospital in Miami. It was done with premature infants. All of the infants received excellent care. But every other infant was put in a group that received, every other hour, in addition to whatever other care the infants got, someone putting their hand into the incubator or crib and stroking the infant for five minutes. The infants who received that stroking, their weight gain was double that of the other infants. The man who ran this experiment said the infants responded to “tactile stimulation.” Horsefeathers! Those infants responded to love.

The growing child, before the ages of five or six, internalizes specific behaviors of the parents as a truth about him or her self. A parent’s depression, anger or anxiety will be interpreted by the child, not as a statement about the parent, but about the self.

Again, I had a person I was seeing go to visit his dying father. He asked his father, “Why were we never close?” The father went into a tirade: “Never close? Do you remember that time when you were seven and dropped a toy into the toilet. I got it

out for you, didn't I?" The list of these trivial events went on and on. This man had always thought of himself as unworthy. His father set him free by revealing his craziness.

Then there are the beliefs the child grows up immersed in. "Our tribe is the best." "Our religion is the only one." "Our race is superior." And on and on and on it goes.

Thomas Merton once said, "God speaks to us in three places: in scripture, in our deepest selves, and in the voice of the stranger."

The tricky part is that all of this goes underground and for some folks it never surfaces except in the unconscious choices they make about how to live their lives.

I've been invited to preach here on the 16th of this month. That's Trinity Sunday. Well, that ought to be simple. Everybody clearly understands the Trinity, right? I had a friend in graduate school who was so troubled and puzzled by the notion of the trinity that he converted to Judaism.

At any rate, while brooding about what I might possibly say in such a sermon, I got to remembering my life-long involvement with the church and some of the hymns we did and do sing. We sing them, those of us who do, with enthusiasm not even being aware of how full they are of exclusive and triumphal language.

"Crown him with many crowns,

the Lamb upon his throne;  
Hark! how the heavenly anthem drowns  
all music but its own.”

Or,  
“At the name of Jesus,  
every knee shall bow.  
Every tongue confess him  
King of glory now.”

Or,  
“Onward, Christian soldiers,  
marching as to war.”

We repeat bonding, behavioral and belief patterns that we don't even know we have. We are tempted, without even knowing it, to repeat patterns, even though they make us miserable, because they are preferable to the unknown. Letting go of the old is a lot more difficult than anybody thinks.

People look at their lives and they don't like how they are unfolding. Yet, it is hard for them to see, even after recounting one sad story after another, that the only consistent character in every scene is themselves. Why do these old patterns have such a grip on us? Because, we are afraid of letting go, of having, as we so quaintly put it, “nothing to hold on to.”

And, we haven't even gotten around to talking about secrets yet. You know, secrets in families.

In the late 1970's I invited my own parents to come to Houston and spend a week with me in family therapy. A week. Every day. With assignments between sessions. It took several years for the pieces to stop falling from the sky.

My parents were married to each other for 72 years. I'd tell people that and occasionally someone would say, "I love my spouse but that's too long."

For their sixtieth wedding anniversary my brother was going to have a celebration and in the hallway that led to the banquet room he was looking for pictures of them at their wedding to line the walk way. He called me one day as he was planning this and said, "Bill, I can't find any pictures of our parents at their wedding."

By this time I had done that week of family therapy. I said to him something he did not know. I said to him, "They didn't have a wedding." You see, what my brother and I had been led to believe about their marriage was not true. They eloped against my father's parents' wishes. What's worse is that within weeks of their marriage my mother got pregnant with my brother, my father lost his job because of the depression and they had to move in with his parents for the first three years of their



marriage and my grandmother hated my mother. But this was all kept secret for decades.

Every one of us can be, and more than likely is, trapped in a web of loyalties that is invisible to us. Mostly, as I have indicated, they can come from our families of origin. But, they come from other places as well. They tell us what to do or not do. We are not born with these messages. We are taught them. Because we have the skills that allow us to survive in the situations into which we are born, we heed these messages. But, there comes a time to say, “What has that message you are giving me have to do with me and my life and my purpose?”

These old loyalties may have been useful at one time but they can also be binding and blinding.

Look right at this moment at the discord that is in the church over old loyalties that have outlived their usefulness. Look at what the effort to avoid social change, evolution and the erosion of old certainties is doing to this country. We cannot any longer live with the rules and regulations of yesterday. Whether it is about race, ethnic, religious beliefs, sexual practices. Take a careful look: what those who want a return to “the good old days” are really wanting is what they thought was their once privileged position back. Or, they want the anxiety about the change “all these other people are bringing” to simply go away. And, the drug people take to deal with this is “certainty,” “biblical authority,” and “traditional values.”

What Jesus said to certainty, authority and traditional values of his day was, “Let it go.”

Am I saying that there is nothing worthy hanging on to? Of course, not. There are values of peace, love, joy, respect. Adlai Stevenson, former Illinois governor and ambassador to the United Nations, once said that the moral measure of a nation is how it treats its least advantaged citizens. He was just echoing a statement of Jesus: “As you have done it to the least of these, you have done it unto me.”

What is amazing about the story in which that teaching occurs is that everybody in it is unconscious. “Lord, when did we see you hungry, sick, naked, in prison, etc.?”

I’m not a pessimist. But, I think the future is bleak. As a country, culture, society we seem to lack the moral will for things to be different. There is a mass shooting and, yes, we are alarmed, concerned, saddened. But, really what can be done about it? Yes, there has been sexual abuse among leaders of religious groups. If someone is treated in a god-like manner, they can easily come to think they are god-like. The revelations come to light, usually decades after the fact and the collective response is, “Well, that’s too bad. But what can you do?”

As James Hollis says in his book, “Living An Examined Life,” psychopathology most often prevails. But, he goes on to say,

that there is something we can work on. That's ourselves. We can work to make ourselves more open to change and to ambiguity and we can develop the courage to let go of certainty. It is not easy. It requires letting go.

It requires accepting with joy and trust that we are losers, right? I mean, seriously. We are all fated to lose our carefully constructed sense of self, our physical health, our precious dignity, our lives. You didn't think you were going to hang on to any of that, did you?

Yet, if we don't let go, we can't move forward in service of life. That's why we are here.

That is why it is so joyfully freeing to know that there is nothing to hold on to.

The more I stay on this journey the more I am convinced that letting go, that leaving home in every sense of that word, is the beginning of a solid spiritual path.

That is what Jesus models for us. He leaves home. He breaks the tie that binds. Then he says, "I'm going to take something that you thought was a religious obligation and turn it into something you can take into yourself and if you do, it will set you free."

It's called knowing that there is nothing to hold on to.

Hold on to that.

No matter where you go this week, no matter what happens, remember this: you carry precious cargo. So, watch your step.